

**BOOK ONE of *THE SON OF NEMESIS*:**

**GLOOMY IN ARELATE**

**by**

**Kyle Smith-Laird**

## **DEDICATION**

*sororique forti ante tempus ademptae  
patrique cui cineres et lacrimas spargimus  
matrique quae poetam iuvenem aluit  
marito dedicatus est amando libellus*

*and to my brave sister gone before her time  
and to my father for whom we scattered ashes and tears  
and to my mother who nourished a young poet  
to my beloved husband this little book is dedicated.*

“And I’ll never go home again (place the call, feel it start)

Favorite friend (and nothing’s right where nothing’s true)

I live in a hologram with you.”

-Lorde, *Buzzcut Season*

## **FOREWARD**

Instead of Ancient Greek, the language of the cultured, erudite, and potentially pretentious Romans, I have substituted modern French, which is the language of the cultured, erudite, and equally potentially pretentious English speaker.

I have used Roman place names, e.g. Arelate (Arlès), Massilia (Marseille), Gaul (France). The Flevii (Flevians) lived in modern day Holland. There are family bushes, a historical summary, and explanations galore in the back for all you kickass history mega-nerds like me.

I have taken certain artistic freedoms with Arelate. For example, the Sunflower Inn is a nod to the painter Vincent van Gogh, who painted many of his most famous works in this picturesque city. I apologize for the anachronistic inclusion of the magnificent arena built in 303 CE, but I also challenge *you* to find a map without it. Any other such inconsistencies or anomalies are purely flights of whimsy on my part. I apologize to the hardcore history purists in advance and eagerly look forward to your scathing excoriations or laudatory comments.

You may reach me at [gaius.publicius@gmail.com](mailto:gaius.publicius@gmail.com).

## **Prologue**

*A Note from Mother*

**20 APRIL CE 26**

*During the reign of the Roman Emperor, Tiberius*

*Son -*

*Burn this immediately after reading. Your father is betrayed; your sister and I are safe but under constant watch. I enclose the razor either to shave or slit your throat. Should all turn dire, seek Sulpicia Rufilla on the Viminal. You know the password. Be well, my son. See you on the other side of the Styx.*

*-Mother*

## CHAPTER ONE: GLOOMY IN ARELATE

*In which our hero begins his quest.*

***humanius est deridere vitam quam deplorare***

It is more human to laugh about life than to cry about it.

Seneca the Younger, *De tranquillitate animi*, III.8

**23 APRIL 26 CE**

*During the reign of the Roman Emperor, Tiberius*

*I'd killed someone last birthday, so murder seemed an oddly fitting gift this year.*

"Name, son?" asked the guard standing in front of Arelate's imposing metal gate. He spat and kept on chewing on Jupiter-knew-what.

I glanced over my shoulder, peering through the dense rain. Still no sign of the pursuers sent after me by Sejanus, the Emperor's current bestie. I'd narrowly missed them an hour ago in the forest, but they wouldn't stop until they found me dead or alive. My luck was holding out. *But for how long?* Hunted down by the elitest of elite soldiers for my seventeenth, I'd naively thought last year's birthday the worst.

I shivered. *Merde!*

"Name?" the guard repeated. "You come in this early in the morning? I got questions."

Sitting on my stolen mare under a relentless rain after a harrowing escape, I prayed to my patron goddess.

*O Fortuna, goddess and protector of book-smart-alecks like me, this birthday boy could use a present, but would settle for a future.*

"Gaius Publicius."

“You trying to be funny, son?”

So imagine the most generic name, one used to identify the unidentifiable body after a battle or fished up from a river? Well, in the Latin of Rome, Gaius Publicius is roughly *John Smith*. Hence his disbelief.

*Still...his accent. Not a townie. So a transplant? Economic refugee or military pensioner...? I was betting on pensioner.*

“No joke. I get that a lot.” I smiled. “Fifth Legion here?”

“Sure are.”

Cold raindrops crisscrossed my face. I wished for the straw hat I’d weaved to pass the time hiding in the woods. The same woods where I’d chunked the heirloom with our family name afterwards. “So tell me, my good man,” I asked, “they still taking volunteers?”

I mean, can you *imagine* a pampered scroll-loving asthmatic like *me* enlisting in the Roman army? All that mindless marching, shouting, and digging? I know, right? The *last* place anyone would ever look for me was marching in endless circles in the army. Jupiter *forfend*!

“Only Rome’s finest.” He drew himself up.

“You served?”

“Sixth Ferrata. Stationed, served, retired here. Honorable discharge and pension. Had this plum job ever since.”

“Ah. Tell you what, soldier: *quid pro quo*? Let me in with no more questions, I’ll give you my horse.”

“Go on,” he said. I peeked over my shoulder. *They had been so close earlier to finding me hiding in a cold, muddy hole. I need to get inside!* “You looking for something?”

“No, just making sure I’m not holding up the line. Say! How about a few coins for a hard-working veteran? Must be rough working in such bad weather. What must they pay you? Even with your pension...”

The rain slowed down. Then stopped. We stood for a moment, relishing the sudden silence, broken first by the soft *frou-frou* of sunflowers rubbing and rustling and waving a cheery welcome to no one in particular, joined then by the gentle burble of the Rhodanus river. Enveloped by a warm breeze rustling and impatient to flee nearby fields, I breathed in the April air, fragrant with lavender and wildflowers and a heady hint of love. Lining both sides of the road, tombstones basked, swathed in balmy sunlight.

“Ain’t that bad. Here, anyhow. Head to the basilica to enlist. Say, that is one fine lookin’ mare.” The guard cocked a knowing eyebrow, so I dismounted while he opened the gate. As I handed him the coins, the guard recoiled. Well, hunger had driven me to eat some dodgy looking berries, resulting in two days of fiery diarrhea on a wet horse. Yeah, I *stank*.

I glanced back. As if right on cue, two familiar horsemen appeared at the forest’s edge. *Merde! Allons-y!* I paid him, scurried through the gate, and heard it slam shut behind me.

Once inside, hunger ruled my thoughts. I bought a loaf of hot bread, broke the crispy crust, smelled the soft, spongy inside, and devoured it all as I sped forward.

With a glance at the closed gate, I wiped off bread crumbs and hurried west down the main road. Soon I lost myself in the flow of the crowd as Arelate came to life with the arrival of the sun. I squinted and reached again in vain for my straw hat. *Merde!* Forever lost, like the family heirloom. And now my stolen mare. *And Father.* I sighed and kept moving.

Down the mile-long main drag, women, slaves, priests, soldiers, and toga-clad politicians were emerging from homes, tittering and balking at merchants selling everything from cabbages

to spices, brooms to bread, oysters and fish sauce and olive oil, and bright, colorful flowers, all aromatic, vibrant, sensuous.

Uncle Aulus had always said it was hard to be gloomy in Arelate. I was getting a whiff of why.

I gawked as long as I dared, passing by the statues of Arelate's latest and greatest. The largest one honored Augustus, our former beloved emperor. I missed Augustus, even though he'd banished our family. Augustus had also begrudgingly left Rome to Tiberius. Or, as Uncle Aulus had called him, Emperor Gloom and Doom.

Still, despite the gloom and doom, Father's death, my grueling journey, and yet another birthday debacle, I smiled as the sun warmed me and cheered up the city.

Yeah, it was hard to be gloomy in Arelate. Tiberius must've never visited.

"Nice haircut," a nearby tchotchke vendor teased me. Yeah, well, I'd have to see a barber soon. I'd butchered my long locks with the family heirloom in my haste to escape after Mother's note. Now I looked like I'd hired a drunken toddler to style my hair.

"New barber," I half-joked back at her. *Would my new 'do throw off my pursuers?*

I pushed past a pack of off duty soldiers strolling in front of me, ignoring the playful catcalls of persistent prostitutes. Father had lectured me never to get involved with one. What I wouldn't give for one of his stern, boring lectures right now. *Father.*

Over the gentle murmur of the morning hubbub, the city gate rang out as it slammed shut with a metallic *clang!* Craning my head around, I spotted them. The two I'd seen earlier at the forest's edge. Halfway to my goal, I took off running towards the center of town. A tight vice on my chest signaled: closing time! *Yeah, great timing, asthma. Merde!* And to make things worse, the

Praetorians had seen me bolt and immediately gave chase. I pushed through the crowd, frantic to find a place to hide, my mind racing, my heart pounding, my breathing shallow.

With the Praetorians hot on my trail, I hustled, hoping to stay conscious. They followed my zigzagging path, their red crested helmets cutting through the crowd like shark fins through the water. My lungs ached for air. My chest closed on me, refusing access. Icy claws encircled my brain. *Merde merde merde!*

As I muscled my way through the crowd, ominous black dots danced on the periphery. I ducked into the shadow from the canopy of the stall of a saffron merchant, where I hid behind a pile of bags and tried to catch my breath. If I didn't find safety soon, I'd pass out. I peeked and saw red crests a few feet behind. I inhaled as much as I could and darted out. In my hasty panic, I forgot to look down. My foot connected with a pole supporting the canopy where I'd hidden. And *crack!* The entire apparatus came down on the heads of the angry saffron merchant and the furious Praetorians. In the fleeting moment, I headed into a crowd and elbowed through like a tourist with a full bladder. I zipped inside Arelate's basilica, AKA the center of Roman law, that housed the army's temporary recruiting station.

Cool air from the ritzy marble greeted me. Emperor Augustus had paid for this, *bien sûr*; such impeccable taste. I leaned on a nearby column, catching my breath. The dots faded, the tyrannical grip on my chest eased, and my wheezing slowed. *Voilà.*

Scanning the room, I saw a bunch of slaves holding up the walls. They were gawking at me like I'd been caught fingering our eighty-year-old empress. From behind the main counter, a clerk cleared his throat. I caught a glimpse of the Praetorians searching the crowd near the basilica's entrance.

*O Fortuna, fickle goddess of fate, don't fail me now.*

“What?” asked the clerk.

“Here...to enlist,” I replied, hoping to sound confident, taller, and less wheezy.

He sighed, then pointed to a staircase. I grinned, nodded my thanks, and sped upstairs. At the top, I took a long, cautious, and exhilarating deep breath. *Voilà*. I opened the door in front of me.

Inside the well-lit room at the top, a wiry, bearded Greek with a receding hairline sat at a tidy desk. This O.I.C. in army kit was dictating to a cluster of soldiers. Their eyes jumped off of their wax tablets, Rome’s preferred method of communicating, to land on me. *Allons-y!*

“You there!” he snapped. “What’s your business here?” Impeccable Latin with a hoarse southern Greek twang. Like all Spartans, he sounded like he was used to getting his way. I drew myself up. It wasn’t much, despite Father’s towering stature. I watched his nose crinkle as my odor hit him. The soldiers parted, pulling the wax tablets to their chests.

“Here to enlist.” I hoped he’d bought my accent, a bit rough around the edges. He frowned. *Merde!*

“As what? A horse? Or practice dummy?”

A young blond soldier stifled a laugh.

As that arse-licking poet Vergil had put it, *Fortuna favors the brave*. I stormed over, snatched his wax tablet, and watched his surprise. Well, desperate times called for desperate measures, and I’d never been more desperate in my life. Or smellier.

“I’m not sure you heard me correctly,” I stated. A nearby soldier sucked air through his teeth, anticipating the worst. “I said I’m here to enlist.”

“I heard you fine,” the Greek O.I.C. hissed back. “Now hand me that tablet at once.”

He stood and made a grab for it, so I pulled back. The soldiers drew their swords. The O.I.C. stared at me for a long time, examining me as if in recognition. My stomach plummeted but I

stood firm. *The Praetorians will kill me if I leave anyhow.* Finally he shook his head and waved the soldiers away. They saluted and scattered to the eight winds. He held out his hand. I handed him the wax tablet. He took it, never taking his eyes off of me, and sat.

“You? In the army? You’re joking. A future scroll-shuffler like you? Are you even fifteen? Your hair looks like you short-changed your barber. You reek like Cerberus’ asshole. And you want to join the army?” He snorted. “Not even if Aphrodite herself came down in her chariot of swans, did the dance of seven veils, and sat on my face. Unless...unless, that is, you can convince me otherwise.”

I reached down and plunked onto his desk my sack of money, nearly all that remained of my purse for a never-to-happen-now birthday trip to Rome. Oh well, Mother and Father hadn’t wanted me to go anyhow. Seems they’d gotten their way yet again. He looked at the sack, grunted in what I assumed was acceptance, took a peek, then dropped it into a drawer.

“Sure you want to do this?” He asked, his tone deadly serious. “There’s lots less dangerous professions. Why the army? Why not just run away with this fortune?” He tapped on the drawer containing my purse.

*“Pas possible, chef.* Let’s just say I have my reasons.”

“Well, you’ve got balls, I’ll give you that.” He nodded to the seat next to me. I sat. He put the tablet aside and pulled out a new one. “I’m Marcus Crixus, prefect for the Fifth Legion. That means I’m in charge of all logistics, and the second highest ranking officer around here. A flea doesn’t fart around here without me knowing about it, understand?”

“I understand.” I let out my breath I’d been holding when he opened the new tablet and took a stylus to carve into the wax. “Does this mean I’m in?”

“Yeah, you’re in,” Crixus confirmed. “Name?”

“Uhhh...”

Panic gripped my brain and stomach. I’d forgotten my new name.

“Are you hourly?” Crixus repeated. “Name?”

My brain spun like a drunken shot-putter. Golden sunlight peeked through the window, framing his silhouette on the tidy desk. *C’mon c’mon c’mon...*

“Gaius Publicius.”

“Original. Next, when and where were you born?”

“Near Narbo. Twenty-third of April. I’m seventeen today.” *Narbo was far enough he might not recognize the accent. Accents and languages? More fun for a nerd like me than a game of strip knucklebones!*

“Happy birthday. Know how to fight?” he asked.

“Thanks, but I’m not big on birthdays. As for fighting? Well, my father and my uncle taught me the basics. But I’m better with words.”

“Words,” he repeated, as if I’d just said *abracadabra* and genie-bobbed my head. “In the army? You gonna load a catapult with a bunch of mean words, boy?”

“No, but I can translate! Other than Latin, obviously, and Greek, *évidemment*, I can speak Thracian, Aramaic, Egyptian, several Germanic dialects, most Celtic languages and dialects, including...”

“Fine, fine. You’ve made your point. We’ve got such a big need for Egyptian here after all, son,” he quipped. “What else worthwhile can you do?”

“I’m clever and good at solving mysteries. Used to read them and solve them before the end. Learned at the knee of the best — my Father.”

“Your father know you’re here?”

“I’m seventeen. Don’t need his permission.”

“I’ve seen more whiskers on an oyster, Publicius,” Crixus sighed, “but fact of the matter is I have a terrible fucking mess to clean up and after this little chat, I think you might be able to help me. I reiterate: *might*.”

“Really?” I exclaimed, amazed at my luck. “I mean, that’s great! So, what kind of mess can I help you with?”

“A murder,” he said with a knowing look.

My stomach dropped and my mind raced. A *murder*? Was he referring to Father’s? Or, after he handed me over to the Praetorians, mine? I instantly regretted my haste to enlist. His gaze weighed on me.

“A murder, you say?” I began warily. “It’d be an honor to keep up the family tradition.” *If not the family name.*

I bit my bottom lip to keep my voice from shaking and hot tears from escaping. Father and Uncle Aulus discussing his cases had been the best times we’d shared. My chest ached with sticky regret and sorrow. *Father. Uncle Aulus.* I bit my lip and avoided falling apart.

“Well, I could use someone like that. We need someone who can talk to the *crème de la crème* here in Arelate. Afterwards, though? What else can you do? Any special talents?”

“I’m a fast reader and I’ve got a good ear,” I replied. “*Vous êtes de Sparte, non?*”

“*Oui, bien sûr.* So you speak Greek. Whoopee. Who doesn’t? No, I need someone with a good knowledge of Frisian. You said you knew some Celtic. You don’t speak Frisian, do you?”

My heart jumped again. *Lady Luck loves me today.*

Mother had invited her Frisian cousin to our home a few years back, and I’d worn him down until he taught me. They spoke Frisian way up north in a part Caesar had called the wildest. And

not the fun kind of wild with wine and song. *Au contraire, Pierre*. Their version of wild involved more: *I'll drink wine out of your hollowed out skull!*

"Sure do," I answered. "Seems I'm your man."

Crixus set his stylus next to the wax tablet.

"My lucky day. Since good sleuths and translators are worth their weight in gold, you're a bargain. Now, to my problem. It won't be easy. We leave in just under five days. And then we're headed west to Burdigala to pick up more recruits. Then north to Lower Germany, into Frisian territory, the very arse-end of Rome's boundaries."

*Well, I'd wanted far, far away.*

"Perfect."

"You'll be working with two other soldiers on the case. Your team will report to me at least once a day. With me so far?"

"Yup." I said. *So a team, huh? Magnifique!* "My team, once a day, got it."

"Look, Publicius," Crixus folded his hands like a school teacher. "Judging by your soft hands, I'm guessing it's safe to say you haven't worked hard. And judging by your attitude, you haven't worked with others. You're in the army now, so you're gonna work hard. And as you Romans are so fond of saying, 'One man is no man.'"

*Two are better than one, as Mother had always put it.*

"Got it."

"And for the love of holy Aphrodite, try to blend in," Crixus warned me. "And here in the army we speak Latin. Everyone. Got it?"

"Got it. What's next?"

“Examine the body, then interview the suspects where the murder happened. The home of a certain Governor...” he paused to glance at a wax tablet. “Governor Balbinus.”

My heart stopped in my chest. A heavy weight pooled at the bottom of my stomach. *Merde merde merdemerdemerde!*

“Governor Manius Vibius Balbinus?” I asked. *The husband of my old neighbor! An old neighbor who had been close with Mother. Oh merdemerdemerde; what have I done?*

“The very one. How do you know him?” Crixus asked, eyebrow arched.

“Uh...by reputation,” I stammered. *Why in the happy hell had I run to Arelate and straight into danger? I’d forgotten that Balbinus and his wife lived here. They were going to recognize me! What then, genius? I should’ve fled to the Viminal Hill to Sulpicia Rufilla where I’d be stuffing my gob full with stuffed quail eggs dipped in fish-pickle sauce. This is what I get for trying to be too clever. And it’s too late to back out now. Allons-y!*

“Speaking of reputation,” Crixus interrupted my thoughts, “I report to one person, General Lucius Apronius, the head honcho of the Fifth Legion. Know of him?”

*Know him? Mother’s insatiable thirst for gossip about Rome’s bigwigs, shakers and movers, and glitterati had left me with a giant mental reserve of fun facts about them.*

“Apronius, huh?” I replied. “Pretty posh credentials. Career soldier with victories in Dalmatia and Africa. And foiled an assassination against the emperor. *Quel* big shot!”

“Indeed, Publicius, as he is fond of reminding me.”

“What about this murder? Care to spill any tasty beans?”

“First? Go bathe. You smell gods-awful. I’ll tell you after. It’s a doozy.”

“No spoiling it?”

“Oh, fine. Just sit a little farther back. I’ll call in the team. Orsus! Felix! Come in here.”

As the door opened, worry and doubt tugged at me. *I should've fled to the Viminal Hill and to Sulpicia Rufilla with the password, far away from Governor Balbinus and his wife! Still, they were looking for me along the roads going east. And even if I'd managed to sneak past them? I'd have been sniffed out in Rome and snuffed out by Sejanus.*

*Sejanus!*

*Sejanus had killed Father for his money. Sejanus was terrorizing Mother and Catia for sport. Sejanus had sent his hounds to hunt me down to prevent me from avenging Father. Sejanus had torn my family apart like a starving prisoner with a hot rotisserie chicken. For two days I shivered and shit in the woods under a cold rain, hiding from trained killers with only my stolen mare and grief as company.*

*Sejanus was the author of all my pain and misery. All for Father's money.*

*So now I would do anything to bring down that bastard Sejanus.*

*Allons-fucking-y!*